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## The Author as a Brand

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Literature today operates as a type of audiovisual culture among communication practices that are characteristic of information societies, which exposes it to a number of opportunities. Contemporary culture is no longer organized by writing, but rather by complex multimedia messages. In this new civilizational configuration – one that poses an ostensible threat to traditional literary works – literature is not necessarily restricted to the margins of social communication as a practice that, while valuable, is anachronistic in terms of its adaptation to contemporary communication standards. On the contrary, contemporary literature can occupy a position in the very center of social practices, that same space in which we live, move, and interact with people and media. I believe that the works of autofiction by authors such as Jerzy Pilch, Jacek Dehnel, and Michał Witkowski have adapted particularly well to this new cultural arrangement, in which they operate not within the confines of a discrete literary space, but at the very heart of contemporary communication.

Autofiction is an exceptionally dynamic genre of literature. It has enjoyed tremendous popularity and poses a challenge to theoreticians, which can rarely be said of writing intended for the general public. Its practitioners have been blurring the lines between life and art,

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confession and self-creation, combining the empirical with the novelistic. From its inception, the genre has probed the limits and capacities of literature, while these continue to change in step with the shifts underway in cultural and communication practices. I believe that, in the literature of today, it is autofiction that most thoroughly exploits the capacities offered by the infrastructure of the information society, which allows it to harness previously non-literary artistic practices and to remain at the center of the exchange of information. I will attempt to demonstrate that literature is sinking into the public sphere, and that rather than creating an alternative world to which we escape, it participates in shaping the world in which we live. Just as art once stepped out of picture frames and the walls of galleries and museums, so literature is now pouring out of books and leaving libraries to enter deep into the sphere of our daily lives and spread through social communication. Literature by such writers as Pilch, Dehnel, and Witkowski designs its physical surroundings; navigating this space is synonymous with the intense experience of the author, who integrates all of the dimensions of this work and is far more than a mere textual figure.

As we examine Witkowski's artistic activities, it will become apparent that the writer's work cannot be limited to the text in the form of a book without discarding a series of semantic fields of reference, ones activated deliberately or unconsciously by the author as well as interactive readers. It was his novel *Lubiewo* that allowed Witkowski to break out of the closed space of traditional literature. The fame the author achieved with this novel is unparalleled in Polish literature, and while the book can be compared to a detonator, the actual explosive charge in this case was, of course, the mass media, which blew it out of proportion, causing it to gradually fall back down into the quotidian. With more than forty reviews in the press and an innumerable number of them online, along with an unending series of interviews, 2005 was unquestionably the year of Witkowski in the categories of "literature" and "personality." The media's interest in him would likely not have been as great were it not for the novel's autobiographical elements. It quickly became apparent that not only was this a literary world which was at once fascinating and shocking, but that one of its inhabitants did, in fact, exist, and the audience were eager to meet him. A new book had been ushered into the literary canon, and accompanying it on the public stage was a new personality: ostentatiously effeminate, politically incorrect, with no regard for social taboos, while turning extreme vulgarity into literary artistry and humour, while also willing to share his secrets; the perfect hero for a culture that had craved novelty since the systemic transformation of 1989.

Since the author was the main character in his own writing, the media took an interest in him, rather than the book, and each interview provided more

information that automatically linked the plot threads to the writer's own biography. Regardless of how much truth there is to Witkowski's personal revelations, every interview he has given integrates with other statements regarded as autobiographical and intertwines with his writing. Consequently, his literary work pours out of the individual novels and begins to form a space of autobiographical information.

Witkowski's media image is a kind of game the writer plays with the readers, a game similar to the one observed in autofictional literature itself. He decides which elements of his own life story to reveal and which to falsify, and the extent to which he shows his actual personality or poses as someone else. The problem is that there is no way to separate the author's presence in the media from his writing. *Lubiewo* paired with the author's public persona form a semantic space which the reader navigates. Subsequent books broaden this space and, furthermore, thematize the author's own mediality.

Witkowski's biography and his media persona have become intertwined with the autofictional *Lubiewo*, forming a single semantic space in which the author is the main character. Just like the novel's Michaśka, the writer presents an exaggerated, flamboyant public image. He made his public debut as the main character of his own novel, and so he has remained. This image is constantly being developed and is subject to minor modifications with the release of subsequent books, but remains consistent. The literary figure automatically refers us to the interviews and photo sessions in which his real (media) counterpart appears, thus making it impossible to focus exclusively on the book and delineate its exact boundaries.

*Lubiewo* eludes stabilization for yet another reason. So far seven editions of the book have been published, each containing a different version of the novel. It is a space of a living, ever-changing text, a space that also includes photographs, illustrations, not to mention the atmosphere conjured up by publishers every time a new version of *Lubiewo* is released. The novel has also made its way into the public space through performances and author appearances. Witkowski himself staged *Lubiewo Show* at Wybrzeże Theater, a one-man show combining recitation with performances of scenes from the novel and – more significantly – performances of himself, as Michaśka is at once the author, celebrity, and the main character of his own books.

The novel has also been released as an audiobook read by the author, while its latest edition, *Bez cenzury* [*Uncensored*], is performed by Jacek Poniedziałek. The choice of actor is significant, as Poniedziałek was one of the first well-known people in Poland to come out as gay. Conscious of the strongly distinct character of Witkowski's vocal performances and how closely linked they have become to his writing, Poniedziałek refrains from proposing a new reading of the novel. The blurb on the cover of the audiobook reads:

To an actor, grappling with this extraordinarily malleable, Gombrowiczian and Old Polish language is like taking on the giant slalom as a beginning skier. Michał does a wonderful job of reading his own books, so I decided that my performance would be more Witkowski than Poniedziałek.

Witkowski performs his novels wonderfully and his interpretations are a part of that literature. *Lubiewo* cannot be separated from the voice of its author, his image, his voice, or the remarks he has made outside the book. Poniedziałek correctly observes that this work operates as a whole, which is why he does not read the text or narrate the novel, performing instead its main character, that is, the author. The actor assumes the role of Witkowski, not some abstract character in this book, because all of his writing, interviews, and recordings are a stage for the spectacle that is the author's personality, rather than a collection of autonomous statements. *Lubiewo* is not a book: it is a semantic space in which the reader navigates through the writer's living text, voice, and image, and through illustrations and events taking place in the public sphere.

Witkowski turned his next book into a performance at TR Warszawa, staging it as a monodrama titled *Barbara Radziwiłłówna Show*. The stage upon which Witkowski performed his novel resembled an enormous book cover. It was as if literature had literally descended from its isolated cultural space into material reality: the author, synonymous with the main character and the actor, appeared on a set that imitated the territory of the novel; his physical surroundings became a setting in which to experience literature. A similar phenomenon occurs at author appearances, where the writer becomes a medium for his own work. Witkowski, known to the public as a figure in his novels and the mass media, appears before them and thus confirms that one is tied to the other, that he himself is the literature.

Przemysław Czapliński aptly observes that Witkowski's narrative is a "ball of garbage rolling around the cultural dumps of the last two decades."<sup>1</sup> Though the critic is referring mainly to *Barbara Radziwiłłówna*, the metaphor is an excellent description of Witkowski's work as a whole. *Lubiewo* is a collection of budding stories collected on the street, gossip elevated to the level of mythology; *Barbara Radziwiłłówna* is a cultural collage or kaleidoscope of Polishness. The next drain into which these gutter stories flow, meanwhile, is *Margot*.

This book perfectly complements the world created by Witkowski. The unabashedly pink cover hides a number of equally bold characters and stories. There is a bit of *Lubiewo* in *Margot*, which resembles the former in the way it

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1 Przemysław Czapliński, *Resztki nowoczesności* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2011), 127.

collects gossip and tosses it into a literary melting pot in which it multiplies and melts into Witkowski's signature style. Michaśka's (i.e. Witkowski's) literary breakthrough is a gallery of queers set against a tacky backdrop. *Margot*, on the other hand, depicts the equally vivid world of long-haul truckers. The trashy bars, parking lots, and seedy-looking girls walking well-worn beats seem familiar enough, but the characters we encounter in these clearings and public toilets reveal their dual identities when, at night, they transform from boring truck drivers into hunters prowling for perverse sexual pleasures.

When asked to explain why the book contained so many hard-core sex scenes, Witkowski replied, "I guess that fucking has become part of my image."<sup>2</sup> It is undoubtedly true that this theme, the execution, and the manner in which the book was written are typical of Witkowski. All of this means that the author of *Margot* is the same Witkowski whom the readers are already familiar with, and as a result he once again becomes the subject of the book. In an online video promoting the novel, the author says: "I think my readers will find it satisfying. They'll find a lot of the vibe of the previous books and the kind they associate with my prose. They definitely won't feel betrayed."

If Witkowski mentions the possibility of betraying the reader, then that indicates the existence of a loyalty pact between the author and his audience. With each book he publishes and public appearance he makes, Witkowski broadens the semantic space in which he is the main character, and he builds a recognizable image based on his signature writing style and personality. His readers derive satisfaction from navigating this autobiographical space, and they await the opening of ever-new spaces to further exploration. Witkowski thus functions not just as a writer, but also as the quality that binds all of his public appearances together. One could say about each of his books: "Yes, this is Witkowski. This matches his persona." The author permeates the entirety of his work and his readers have grown accustomed to this fact. The same is true of *Margot*, in which Witkowski has a strong presence. The visual convention of the book itself and the style of the author's photo on the cover allow us to assume that this is the good old Michaśka we know from his previous novels. The author is revealed through the language and the extravagant stories relayed in the book, particularly in part two, which discusses Polish celebrities. Witkowski describes a milieu to which he belonged after the success of *Lubiewo*, while the story of the rise and fall of a great star, Waldek Mandarynka, is, to a certain extent, the story of the author himself.

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2 Michał Witkowski, "Witkowski jedzie tirem," interview by Tomasz Kwaśniewski, *Duży Format*, [http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,6946944,Witkowski\\_jedzie\\_tirem.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,6946944,Witkowski_jedzie_tirem.html), accessed September 4, 2012.

The release of *Margot* was accompanied by an unconventional promotional campaign. Along with billboards promoting both the book and Witkowski, the title was marketed using techniques hitherto unseen by the Polish literary industry. Crucially, the entire campaign focused on the author himself. At a metro entrance in downtown Warsaw, one of the most crowded locations in the city, Witkowski sold mandarin oranges from a small booth, where he also signed copies of his book for readers. The author wore a t-shirt promoting the novel; the garment itself had a certain symbolic undertone. The front of the shirt bore references to the cover and first part of the book, in which readers encounter the author as they remember him from his previous novels. This is the essence of Witkowski's personality and style: lacking any moral restraints, perverse and vulgar, yet blurring all of this foulness with his signature sense of humor. On the other hand, the back of the shirt, emblazoned with the words "I am Waldek Mandarynka!," is associated with the author's depiction of the world of Polish show-business, but also with Michaśka, who was a media heroine. This t-shirt — one side of which referenced literature imbued with Witkowski's style and personality, while the other alluded to his presence in the media — was worn by the author himself, thus emphasizing the indivisibility of the two orders. Such t-shirts and other literary paraphernalia advertising *Margot* were provided to readers who demonstrated particular involvement in the world created by the author.

Following the premier of his new book, Witkowski was invited to appear on the talk show hosted by Kuba Wojewódzki, who happens to be one of the characters in the novel. The author took the opportunity to promote his latest book as well as himself. He appeared on television not just as a writer, but also as a character in the novel who leads a double life, a well-known and respectable person who, at night, transforms into a degradation-seeking prostitute. There are so many levels here that it is difficult to separate them. On a couch next to the host sits the inaccessible flesh-and-blood author, one familiar to us only as a media persona, the subject of photo sessions and interviews. He is also a writer who is consistently present in his own books as a certain recognizable style, a worldview, a quality that binds his entire literary output and refers to the concept of the author embedded in the consciousness of his readers. But it is also the main character of *Margot*, who is appearing on the show to create another chapter of the novel external to the book. On the one hand, he appears as a figure with a double identity (thus augmenting the first part of the book), and, on the other, he undergoes a metamorphosis in front of the audience, becoming a star (thus expanding the part about celebrities).

Though the author appeared on the show in an ordinary, inconspicuous outfit, it did include a subtle element that revealed the role he assumed in secret. This was a reference to the characters in *Margot* and their practice

of dressing up, both in the literal sense and with respect to their identities. While he appeared to be dressed in ordinary clothing, a long, sequined women's blouse emerged from below his leather jacket. The entire situation was explained by the "Margot" pin – one of the promotional items mentioned above – on the author's jacket. On the one hand, the pin explained what the whole masquerade was about, and, on the other, it announced the literary annexation of the space of the television studio. The women's blouse concealed beneath the jacket was hot pink, the same color as the cover of the book and the purse Witkowski was carrying. "Lot lizard" handbags like this one, containing *Margot* and promotional items, were sent to the literary desks of various media outlets, to the universal surprise of the editors. The very packaging of the novel made reference to the recognizable style to which everyone had grown accustomed through Witkowski's books and public appearances.

Witkowski put on a literary spectacle at Wojewódzki's talk show. He appeared as a recognizable writer and a character in the novel, while also performing the part about celebrities and media manipulation before the entire country, thus re-enacting the author's success story concealed in Waldek Mandarynka's own biography. The forgotten writer once again became the subject of gossip, a topic of discussion, and a target for photojournalists. It is a literary story that descended into reality. The author did not exist beyond his own work, as he turned every public appearance into a literary performance, the space in which he performed his own personality. Where there was Witkowski, there was also literature.

Michał Witkowski returns as a writer and media personality in *Drwal* [*Lumberjack*]. This time our subject is not hidden behind any character, but appears under his own first and last name, reinforcing the connection between the novel and reality with constant references to Witkowski's appearances in the public sphere. The author is present in *Drwal* as a character and, through the book's meta-literary threads, as an actual writer. Furthermore, the story of Witkowski's media career is so essential to the novel that certain elements of the plot are incomprehensible to readers who lack this knowledge.

Before the book was even released, a series of films were posted on the author's website and YouTube in which Witkowski talks about himself and his new novel. Each clip opens with a foreboding musical intro and a visual sequence in which the cover of *Drwal* appears on the screen. The films all end in an identical manner: they are shut between the first and last pages of a symbolic book. This device alone, one that combines many statements under a single label, suggests that they collectively form a single literary space. What was released in the advertisement market was not a complete and finished book, but a transmedia story comprising the text, vocal interpretations, public performances, and videos published online and on television. The location in

which Witkowski's statements were recorded are particularly telling. The author is seated on a chair in a room with a decor resembling that of Communist Poland: tacky upholstery, unbelievable imitation leather, classic Gierek and Gomulka-era wall units, an old hair salon hood dryer repurposed as a floor lamp, and many other objects on which the era of bad taste and mediocrity left its indelible mark. It's an apartment taken not from People's Poland, but from the world of Witkowski's novels, which are invariably populated to some extent by the mental and material relics of the previous political system.

Witkowski appears in the book as its writer, a literary character, and pop-culture icon, thus demonstrating the fact that these orders intertwine and that it is impossible to separate his public communiques into different autonomous domains, first, because all of these appearances combine at the level of the plot and together create an autofictional stage on which the spectacle of the author's personality takes place. Second, our natural inclination as the audience is to combine scattered bits of information into a semantic whole. We think in terms of associations, and our perception is trained to integrate, rather than deconstruct, audiovisual communiques. To pick up only one communication channel operated by Witkowski would require us to assume a transcendental stance *vis-à-vis* culture, which, of course, is impossible. Witkowski's writing reveals the uselessness of the methodologies and concepts assumed in the study of literature. In order to comprehend the specific nature of this work, one must ask not what it means, but how it works; only then will its open, spatial, multimedia nature be revealed.

What I have presented here is a short and randomly-chosen route that one may plot through the enormity of Witkowski's literary work. I hope, however, that this minor sample of the possibilities that lie within his writing illustrate the sheer scale of its potential. I have focused on Witkowski as the phenomena that interest me are most vibrant in his work, but the oeuvres of such writers as Dehnel, Pilch, and Stasiuk could be mapped in a similar fashion.

Witkowski's writing demonstrates that the scope of literature can overlap with the scope of our everyday activities, encompassing not just books, but also the press, the Internet, television, radio, and the public sphere; it shows that dispersed bits of literature are everywhere and are readily accessible. As the distance between the audience and the medium disappears, we begin to experience literature from the inside, as if in direct contact with its surfaces. Its places in contemporary culture and social communication can be understood with the help of a theory formulated by Scott Lash and Celia Lury:

In this view, subjects encounter not a signifying structure, or even the materiality of the signified, but the signified or sense itself as it is materialized. This is communication. This is information. The media environment,



or mediascape, is a forest of extended intensities, of material signifieds around which subjects find their way, orient themselves via signposts. Thus Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry recalled the extensity of a landscape; today's global culture industry has the intensity of a mediascape.<sup>3</sup>

It is becoming increasingly difficult to examine culture strictly in terms of a superstructure or sphere of values that is separate from us and operates somewhere above our heads; art, meanwhile, no longer fits into the traditional model. The division between culture and economy or the domain of art and material reality is becoming inoperable. At some point, the ubiquity of radio, television, and newspapers in our everyday began to feel more like things than media: that tendency has only intensified in recent times. The reification of media and the parallel process of transforming things into media constitute, in Lash and Lury's view, the very foundation of the global culture industry.<sup>4</sup>

The reification of media and the mediatization of things are two parallel processes from which there emerges a culture that does not discern between life and art, or action and interpretation. We speak of reification when music starts to be played in public – on the radio, on the bus – thus becoming an element of the contemporary audiosphere; when a fairy-tale world and its characters become the theme park that is Disneyland; when films are transformed into computer games; when brands such as Apple organize their retail space in a particular way or turn the launch of a new product into a spectacle that draws eager audiences in the hundreds and is viewed online by millions of people.

The mediatization of things, on the other hand, occurs when objects or events acquire sign value and start to function in a web of relations moderated by the media. One example is the Euro 2012 football championship hosted by Poland and Ukraine. The radio chooses the official song for the tournament, television focuses on the event for a few months, billboards bearing the tournament's logo transform the space of the city, and the same symbols appear on food and sporting goods alike. The Euro Cup as a brand and particular vibe exists thanks to the circulation of signs in media.

The superstructure descends onto the base, while the latter rises towards the former. They meet halfway, where media become reified and material

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3 Scott Lash and Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 14.

4 See *ibid.*, 8.

environments are mediatised. The authors of *The Global Culture Industry* call the meeting point of both tendencies the media environment.

In this in-between zone a material environment [...] has become media-tized. And mediums (the films and art) have descended into the environment, as merchandise, as installations. Image has become matter and matter has become image: media-things and thing-media.<sup>5</sup>

Thing-media becomes part of our everyday lives; the distance that once separated us and them is disappearing, and thus we no longer relate to them through meaning and interpretation, but rather by navigating them. Goods acquire cultural value, while art acquires exchangeable value. Products gain sign-value, and art turns into merchandise and descends into reality. The division between artworks and things ceases to be functional. Media and things meet in the same sphere of intensity, the media environment, which is at once the place in which we live. Art is no longer something that is in front of us: it is now beside us. The epistemological relation is supplanted by ontological co-participation. We live in the same space in which the reified artworks operate, and thus we do not interpret signifiers, but rather encounter signifiers; the mediascape is an intense environment. "In such an environment," Lash and Lury write, "the people who make, circulate and use objects are not external to such an environment. To put this differently, our method does not assume a distinction between media and society."<sup>6</sup>

I believe that contemporary autofiction can operate in just such a media environment. It is not external to us, and we do not pick it up as a message that requires interpretation; rather, we encounter it, we move among its different pieces. In writing about the process of reification, Lash and Lury make no mention of literature, as the assumption that media are objects is associated with one condition: that these media are not texts. Film, music, paintings, sculptures – all of these were once texts in the sense that the viewer or listener maintained an epistemological relationship with them. They were representations, not things, thus it was through interpretation that we interacted with them in a semantic order. Media that were texts were reified, but these texts – in the literal sense – remain texts that can be read. As an activity that is spread out in time, reading is always interpretation, and thus it does not belong to the momentary, intense mediascape: the text is a web of signifiers, not the signified. Such is the logic proposed by Lash and Lury. However,

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5 Ibid., 9.

6 Ibid., 28.

I consider this understanding to be incorrect when applied to the context of Witkowski's writing. In presenting Witkowski's literary work as a multimedia web of relations that can be navigated, I have also demonstrated the process by which literature can be reified – literature made to pour out of libraries and step into our daily lives, becoming a part of the mediascape. The theory postulated by Lash and Lury can be expanded to include the phenomenon of the reification of texts, making it particularly useful in describing contemporary literature, which is undergoing a number of transformations as an object of culture and is acquiring its own dynamic within the culture of circulation.

Literature becomes a material object of culture when it descends into reality and designs a space through which we can move. Authors appear on television, in the press, on the Internet and on billboards, and their likenesses are extensions of a personality game that blurs the boundaries between subsequent books, before finally emerging from their confines, stepping into the mediascape, which overlaps with the social sphere. All of the authors' media appearances become literary, and the writers descend from their separate artistic space into the materiality of social communication, thus becoming a permanent fixture of the cultural space. Literature – which has functioned thus far only in the order of representation, interpretation, and meaning – is becoming, by way of contemporary communications practices, ubiquitous and reified; it is becoming a part of our environment, an object of culture to which we relate not so much through interpretation as we do by navigating it.

Literature is taking over entire sections of bookstores along with exhibitions and billboards; its images are all over the daily press, the Internet, and television; it is materializing as merchandise such as posters of the writer, distributed with magazines, and bags, t-shirts, and pins advertising Witkowski's book. Literature is being transformed into parties, installations, and artistic events such as the happenings and theater performances staged by the author of *Lubiewo*, and literary events held in the form of spectacles, recorded and posted online for all to view. These are situations in which the authors – and, at the same time, their characters – leap from the books directly into reality. Once separated from the world in its own space of focus and silence, literature now enters the din of social communication when it is broadcast in the public space such as a train station or shopping mall as a radio show or audiobook, thus becoming a part of the contemporary audiosphere.

I believe that this reification of literature was only possible because the process was strictly tied to the mediatization of its author. The text came into existence as matter, while the author became the medium of his own work. Witkowski does not function at the base-level as a flesh-and-blood author or as a literary representation (autobiography) at the superstructure-level.

Just like his literature, he operates in the “middle” ground, in the mediascape, where he exists in a web of relations moderated by media. The text descends from the sphere of art into reality, while the author undergoes mediatisation. There is no boundary between the author and the text, as both function together on the same plane, in the intense media environment. The author, together with his autofictional text, create a single object of culture, one that combines the material and media aspects. The readers, meanwhile, operate in the same space, as there is no distinction between media and society.<sup>7</sup>

Every encounter with Witkowski’s writing is an intense experience of the author. Rather than signifying structures, we come across the actual signified, which is a certain recognizable authorial quality. It is this quality that permeates and integrates every public appearance he makes, and because of it each element of his transmedia oeuvre refers back to a single identity that combines into a whole. The author functions as a brand, integrating a broad space of signs and bestowing external value on products. The intense experience that is Witkowski’s writing does not reveal the writer’s life story (his autobiography), but rather the virtual core of this autofictional literature, that is the author’s own brand. His work affects us not through books, but through the brand. It involves the production of a virtual difference that bestows value and an identity on this work, yet it can neither be named nor indicated. Witkowski writes one book after the other, each different from the previous, yet they all refer us back to the same brand, just as all Apple products – aluminium laptops, iPhones, and iPods – share a certain identity that defines the image of the company as a whole. In one interview the author describes this intense and virtual quality, one that defines all of its material extensions, as *witkowszczyzna*, or *Witkowskiness*. The literary space marked by the writer’s books and public activities is a place in which readers experience *Witkowskiness*.

Lash and Lury write:

The commodity is produced. The brand is a source of production. The commodity is a single, discrete, fixed product. The brand instantiates itself in a range of products, is generated across a range of products. The commodity has no history; the brand does. The commodity has no relationships; the brand is constituted in and as relations. The commodity has no memory at all; the brand has memory. The products in which a brand instantiates itself, indeed actualizes itself, must somehow flow from the brand’s memory, which is the brand’s identity.<sup>8</sup>

7 See *ibid.*, 29.

8 *Ibid.*, 6.

I believe that Witkowski's writing has generated such a great density of internal and external relations, and that it has traveled so many trajectories between media and the audience, that it has begun to be discerned as separate and unique. The brand emerged, as if from its own background, at the intersection of individual books and the writer's public activities. It is a kind of identity that is not contained in the author's individual appearances, but permeates them all. It is the virtual core of this work, one that is actualized in material realizations. Witkowski actualizes his brand in books on the subject of fluid identity, in camp aesthetics, photographs, audio recordings, films, his trademark style, and his general media personality.

The brand operates as a virtual generative structure. It is an intense core that develops towards extensity and predicates; an abstract individuality, always unspecific. It permeates the work of authors, but it is not the same as their appearances or books. Thus, in contrast to products, the brand cannot be owned. When we buy a brand-name product or a Witkowski novel, we purchase the right to participate in the experience of the brand. The value of this work lies not in the writing itself, but is bestowed from outside, and comprises in part our own relationship with the brand.

The work of the author of *Lubiewo* affects us not through autonomous books, but as one great project named Witkowski that functions capably within the mediascape. Each of the books are part of the brand and contain what Baudrillard calls "sign value." Witkowski is a cultural phenomenon in Polish literature and his brand cannot be examined merely in terms of the "quality of the books," as this approach would preclude the understanding of how his work functions and how it affects the audience. The value of brands is determined based not on the products they manufacture, but the efficacy with which they have captured the social imagination. Products released by companies such as Apple or Nike have use value and exchange value, but it is not their internal qualities that persuade consumers to purchase more and more of them. Consumers buy them because they are part of a brand: they have sign value that refers to a virtual identity with which the users feel they have a relationship. I believe that Witkowski's work functions in a similar manner, but on a micro scale. The value of the writer can be found not just in his literature, but also in its many extensions and emotional capital. The value of the media transfer initiated by Witkowski increases together with the value of the brand thanks to the emotional engagement of the readers.<sup>9</sup> One may evaluate individual books as autonomous entities, but this literary work functions through the sign value which, to the readers, constitutes

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9 See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 207.

the difference that emerges in their relationship with the brand. The literary value is a quality of the book. The brand and the sign value are qualities of the experience that arises from the consumer's relationship with the brand.<sup>10</sup>

Witkowski's work functions through a virtual brand that is concretized with each appearance the writer makes. We perceive the object, but we experience the intensity of the brand, the signified. Lash and Lury write:

The brand experience is a feeling, though not a concrete perception. Thus Walter Benjamin talks about the colour of experience. What Benjamin is saying is that you may perceive the painting, say, as an object, but what you experience is non-objectual — that is, colour. This is the experience of an intensity. Brands may embrace a number of extensities, but they are themselves intensities. Brands are in this sense *virtuals*. As virtuals, they may be actualized in any number of products. Yet the feeling, the brand experience, is the same.<sup>11</sup>

Our contact with Witkowski's work is an experience of the intensity of author as a brand, an experience that determines the identity of this literature and is its core or soul. The social imagination of the readers encompasses not only the likenesses of the writers, their voices, and the topics encountered in their writing, but also the signifieds, that is, something virtual. Every element of Witkowski's work refers back to this virtuality, which is the basis of our emotional relationship with a brand. We encounter his autofictional work in our everyday lives – in the newspaper, in books, on the radio, on television, and online – and, as a whole, it constitutes a sort of installation; it is a physical environment that enables us to immerse ourselves in the experience of the brand, in the author's intensity. It is literature that does not signify, but affects us. We do not read it, but rather we experience it by navigating it. We encounter materiality – voices, quotations, a likeness – and we experience intensity, the essence of the matter.<sup>12</sup> The writer's work does not function as a narrative, but as an identity. It does not tell the author's story, because it is itself like him: it is his (his brand's) concretization.

Witkowski builds brand awareness by encouraging the readers to form an emotional bond with him, a close relationship that wins him their constant attention. Without the interest of the audience there is no one to drive the flow of information, and when this circulation subsides, the sign value of this work

<sup>10</sup> See Lash and Lury, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> See *ibid.*, 197.

is threatened, as is the brand's position in the social imagination. Witkowski affects us through the virtuality of his brand, which functions not in a separate cultural space, but immanently within the very bloodstream of society. It does not impact the readers mechanically, through an external influence, but vitalistically, drifting and self-organizing within the social imaginarium. It is like bio-power: physiological, rather than mechanical.<sup>13</sup> What is at stake here is the virtual order of capturing the audience's attention, the highest good of contemporary culture.<sup>14</sup>

Brands can never be owned: one can only build a relationship with them, and this requires an encounter with their many concretizations. Witkowski's work is a distributed database, and the brand drives us to explore and navigate it. It is literature that bears the promise of a multiplicity of experiences. While this offers us constant entertainment, it also leaves us unsatisfied. We build a relationship with the brand, following its actualizations, but no matter our level of consumption, we will never acquire the object upon which we bestow our affection, because it is virtual. Our active reception is further driven by the temporal and spatial conditions of our access to the brand's various actualizations, merely compounding its value and attractiveness. The consumer is under the pressure of time and must keep up with the flow of information. Literary events, interviews, radio and television programs: all of these constitute Witkowski's transmedia work. Henry Jenkins writes:

To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience.<sup>15</sup>

Authors circumscribe a broad context in which our own activity takes place, but this context does not remain stable. The price we pay for open access to information is its short shelf life. Not only does it become outdated, it is lost entirely when not recalled for too long. This work is based on ephemeral events – appearances on television and the radio – that wind up online for all to access. But the Internet is not a stable archive. With time, links break and

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, 12–13.

<sup>14</sup> See Kazimierz Krzysztofek, "Status przemysłów kultury: między ekonomią i kulturą," in *Perspektywy badań nad kulturą*, ed. Ryszard W. Kluszczyński and Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2008), 234.

<sup>15</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 21.

information disappears. This is a literature that relies on novelty and newness, in the broad senses. Traditional literature is geared towards transmission and is linked to the dynamic of collective memory. The work of Witkowski and his ilk is based on communication, the flow of information at a given moment. It operates in a narrow time frame, focusing on topicality and synchronicity, rather than diachronicity, and does not seek to leave a permanent mark. It operates on quickly processable information, not values and knowledge that appeal to our long-term memory. It speaks to a contemporary audience, which, thanks to mediated communication, always exists “in the same time,” rather than to future generations.<sup>16</sup>

Brands and Witkowski's transmedia work both operate in an affective economy that mobilizes readers to pay constant attention and receive messages in real time. Yet this temporal logic is not a shortcoming of this work; on the contrary, it creates positive time pressure. It makes the appearances more appealing, and every audience member who spends time accompanying the brand in its media journeys is rewarded with more content. Ideal consumers always have their eyes wide open, constantly searching for new access points to their desired sources of entertainment, becoming emotionally engaged in expanding their experience, and eagerly sharing information with their social networks.<sup>17</sup> That's how convergence culture works. Different media systems are forced to cooperate, and the content flows smoothly among them. Rather than being limited to a single medium, the audience travels in search of information and combines contents drifting across different media systems.<sup>18</sup> This manner of consuming culture sustains the depth of the experience and stimulates a sense of satisfaction at having created our own, unique interface to the world, thus motivating us to consume even more.

According to Jenkins, a characteristic feature of contemporary cultural production are extensions, or “efforts to expand the potential markets by moving content or brands across different delivery systems.”<sup>19</sup> This way of organizing information responds to the expectations of the audience, which travels freely across different media platforms in search of content. I believe that the theory formulated by the American media scholar offers an apt description not just of large entertainment industries, but also of the work of Witkowski and authors like him.

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16 Régis Debray, *Wprowadzenie do mediologii*, trans. Alina Kapciak (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2010), 5–19.

17 See Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 25.

18 See *ibid.*, 3.

19 *Ibid.*, 284.



Witkowski's work testifies to a radical shift in how literature operates, a shift that is due only in part to the media infrastructure of the information society. What appears to be more relevant is the change that has occurred not at the technological level, but in our way of thinking and our perceptive strategies. Literature does not necessarily need to use hypertext in order to create non-linear narrative labyrinths, nor must it abandon the book for multimedia in order to expand into the realms of film, photographs, and sound. We don't need links to connect information in different media systems and areas of culture, because we can find the connections ourselves and follow our own paths. Our ability to pick out and combine information enables us to operate freely in the mediascape and to consume the work of such writers as Witkowski in the manner I propose above. The author of *Lubiewo* has created a multimedia autobiographical space which we navigate. Additive comprehension allows us to follow Witkowski's brand, which concretizes itself in various texts, media, and events, thus acquiring its own dynamic. Witkowski's literature is an interactive installation of sensations that the author enables us to experience. Not the flesh-and-blood author, but the authorial brand that permeates this entire body of work and allows us to find a certain identity within it. Attempts to limit this work to the traditional reading of text would resemble the actions of Adorno, who formulated his theses regarding American television shows based on their scripts, without ever having switched on a TV set.<sup>20</sup>

*Translation: Arthur Barys*

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20 See Theodor W. Adorno, "Telewizja jako ideologia," in *Sztuka i sztuki. Wybór esejów*, trans. Sław Krzemień-Ojak, ed. Karol Sauerland (Warszawa: PIW, 1990).